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The possession of women to enact justice through the mystique of the Atlantic is the basis for Mati Diop's Atlantics (2019), winner of the Grand Prix award at the 2019 Cannes Film Festival. The major themes of the film focus on migrancy, women's rights, and post-colonial corruption. These are shown through scenes of spiritual possession, women enacting justice for the men who died migrating to Spain, and the corruption of the local police force. In her book *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self*, Stacy Alaimo coins the term 'trans-corporeality', which argues that humans are porous beings who constantly interact with diverse organisms in the environment (Alaimo 2010). Greta Gaard introduces ecofeminism as "attending to the quality of human-environment, human-human, and First World/two-thirds-world relations and interactions" (Gaard 70). This film travels past gender stereotypes by combining African mythology and the significant presence of the Atlantic on Africa's citizens. It also depicts critical instances of local and foreign corruption and how those two structures work together to create an atmosphere of forced migrancy and gender roles. In other words, *Atlantics* is a film that presents the argument for trans-corporeality and ecofeminism based on the potentially problematic

ways Diop positions her female and male characters between the Atlantic and how different forms of corruption are slowly built up in Africa.

Before I begin, I will give a brief synopsis of the film that focuses more on the end, as the final third will be the concentration of my essay. The film is set in a beachside suburb of Dakar, the capital of Senegal. It focuses on the relationship between Souleiman and his friends, construction workers for a futuristic-looking tower, and Ada and her friends, intimately connected by romance or familial bonds. Souleiman and his coworkers have not been paid four months' wages from the construction site owner and choose to risk migrating across the Atlantic to reach Spain. They die attempting and come to possess their loved ones' bodies over several nights to receive reparations for their deaths from the construction owner. Souleiman, however, does not possess Ada; he possesses a detective, Issa, who is tasked with investigating the crimes the women, possessed by the men, achieve during the night. The ocean plays a unique role in the film, as it is shown full-screen thirteen times throughout the film and is constantly heard in the background of most scenes. This intimate connection to the Atlantic is a central argumentative point within Diop’s tale of the African spirit.

Diop conceptualizes trans-corporeality through an African perspective. That is, she uses African mythology and the Atlantic Ocean to show how Africans live in a post-colonial age and simultaneously presents

by what method they can move towards an alternate future. In a scene towards the end, the men possessing the women sit around a beach bar lighted by only dim neon lights with the waves rolling in the background. One of the men comments on their deaths, “It was quiet in the boat…I thought we were nearly there because I could see a mountain in the distance. I thought we’d reached Spain and we’d finally be able to call you all. Then it all happened so quickly. A strong wind whipped up the sea” 1:21:44-22:15). Throughout this monologue, the camera cuts several times to where it faces the mirrors of the bar; in the mirrors are the apparitions of the men who drowned at sea, while the women possessed sit in the physical world. In this somber moment, Diop depicts the men as migrants or martyrs and the women as only capable of suffering, yet together, they are one in spirit through their shared history in the Atlantic. Alaimo writes, “Trans-corporeality also opens up a mobile space that acknowledges the often unpredictable and unwanted actions of human bodies, nonhuman creatures, ecological systems…” (2). In this beach bar that functions at night as a spiritual gathering, Diop utilizes the men’s spirits within the women’s bodies to portray how Senegal must begin to deny their conservative gender roles if the country wants to move into the future. This film moves past the notion of human and non-human, and it also moves past, to a certain extent, the notion of male and female. Men and women together, in one body, connected by the Atlantic, reliving shared trauma of their contemporary history and all those who came before them. This film is a radical showing

of the African spirit, revealing that Africa's way forward is coming together in mind and body.

I would next like to discuss how the men's possession of the women may be deemed problematic in the context of ecofeminism. The night following their "reunion" at the beach bar, the men successfully forced the construction site owner to pay their four months' wages so their families could continue to survive. However, before they let the owner leave, they demand that he "Dig our graves first" (1:33:32). The men, given spiritual possession by the Atlantic, intimately need the women on a physical level to help receive the reparations due to them. As Gaard writes in her essay "Ecofeminism," she states, "women's gender roles restrict women's mobility…women's right to bodily self-determination…becomes an ecological issue as well in a context of economic globalization…and gendered forms of colonization that appropriate women's bodies" (70-71). The women were left behind; they were not deemed worthy enough to be migrants by the men, yet their bodies must now be used to finish what the men were unable to do. Women in this film are, at times, subjected to gendered stereotypes of limited mobility and staying within the home. However, when the time comes, their presence is pitifully needed to enact the justice needed for local and global corruption.

Diop is well aware of this and can be seen as satirizing this possession at times, pointing out how foolish it should be to rely on the women in your life now that you are dead. She does this not by comedic effect but by the

romantic aspect shared between her and Souleiman. In Ada's final remarks before the film ends, after she has spent the night with Souleiman in the beach bar, she says, "Some memories are omens. Last night will stay with me, to remind me who I am… and show me who I will become. Ada, to whom the future belongs." (1:41:00-15). This meaningful and deeply intimate relationship digs the way forward for young Africans. After the beach bar has been transformed from a place of shared trauma, love, and physically revealing trans-corporeality, Ada realizes the future belongs to her and all Africans who are willing to engage in expressive relationships with each other. Gigi Adair, in her article "The Spirit of Migrancy: Mati Diop *Atlantique,*" writes, "Ada looks to the future while refusing incorporation in the empty homogenous time of the neoliberal present" (11). The future is built on rejecting society's normative roles and, to Adair's point, the global North that provides Africans with crippling exploitation. Instead, Ada rekindles hope for an alternative future by recognizing the relationship between each other and the nature that connects them, while Issa provides hope in a different form.

The film makes another connection to ecofeminism by showing what can happen when women are stopped from providing for themselves and have to rely on others for their needs. In the film, when Issa is interviewing Souleiman's mom, the viewer is shown how they treat her and the house's condition. "Sir, you can't search through my house like this! – Madam, let go of me. Where is his room? Where is Souleiman's room?" (00:44:32-46)

The walls are crumbling to the point that open sunlight can penetrate through the ceiling, and bricks are loosely connected to form Souleiman's room on the second floor. Issa practically ignores her existence and her rights, only talking to her when he wants her to give up information regarding Souleiman. As Gaard states, "ecofeminists argue for detecting and correcting injustices as they occur, and advocate policies and practice… that offer more effective strategies for intervention and prevention of social and ecological crises" (Gaard 70). The film provides an insightful critique of how patriarchy functions when it is allowed to escalate with little to no care for the subaltern citizens who have no say regarding policy and injustices. Even when a man was providing for her, Souleiman's mother lived in squalor amidst a ruined building that is both a social and ecological crisis. If the building is to collapse, there will be more citizens injured and unable to work, not to mention the environmental damage that dust will do to others living nearby, or the runoff can impact storm drains and surrounding nature.

Moving on to how corruption is tackled within the film, Diop portrays a hopeful notion that this prevalent issue may be examined through trans-corporeality. Just before the closing scene, Issa, the detective who is a part of the corrupt police force and is the chosen vessel for Souleiman, resigns after spending the night as Souleiman with Ada. "Commissaire. The case is closed" (1:39:31-40:20). Through Souleiman and his connection with the natural state of Senegal and its corruption, Issa brings himself to resign,

showing how change emerges locally. Adair states, “it is Senegalese elites—powered, of course, by global capital—and negligent authorities who are responsible for the corruption and exploitation at the tower site” (Adair 7). After having earlier in the film been denied investigating the construction site owner with his connection to the missing migrants, Issa realizes he can no longer commit to empowering corruption and exploitation by the Senegalese elites. His spiritual journey, accompanying one of the migrants missing at sea due to tainted ignorance, seeing all that was lost along with an invaluable human life, brings him to recognize that he is unable to continue hurting Africa’s people and environment as he did before.

Senegal is shown as corrupted by more than the local authorities; as mentioned above, the global North plays a large part in the reason why Souleiman and his friends drowned in the Atlantic. At the film's beginning, amidst the construction site in the dust-covered Dakar, Souleiman and his coworkers learn that the owner left on business and did not leave them their money. “Earlier, on the site, I told you we were going to pay you today. But we’ve just heard Mr. N’Diaye is away on business and hasn’t left the money” (00:03:34-43). Diop confronts Senegal’s seeming paradoxical independence at the very beginning of the film. If Senegal is meant to be seen as a country that can take vast amounts of foreign investment to build a futuristic tower, then there should be plenty of money to cover the worker’s wages, correct? In John Walsh’s article “The Spectral Climate of ‘Emerging Senegal’ in Mati Diop’s *Atlantics*,” he writes, “the alienation

caused by global, spectral forms of capital that build towers at the expense of the lives of laborers. [Souleiman] is made undead by virtual powers that cause material dispossession of land and sea and the way of life that had sustained communities for generations" (Walsh 16). These "spectral forms of capital" come in the form of the tower but also as the seemingly ghost-like boss of the project who is unable to appear before his workers and give them their money. This boss is backed up by the global North and their foreign investments to "re-invent" Senegal. However, as Walsh mentions, they are either ignorant or predatory regarding understanding the community's way of life.

Atlantics position the global North as inherently inferior at dealing with the issues of Senegal and the community. Climate change is a leading cause of migrancy, and experts suspect that by 2050, there will be over 1 billion climate refugees around the globe (IEP 2020). Instead of building futuristic-looking towers and not paying the wages of the workers who build the tower, sending them off to a watery grave, it would be better to begin to look inward and focus on the local aspects of the community. Robert Emmett and David Nye talk about the concept of localization in their book *The Environmental Humanities: A Critical Introduction,* in which they discuss the benefits of localization. "Localization is based on sustainable growth that includes recycling and improvements in design and manufacturing, in order to minimize waste" (118). While localization focuses on building and growing aspects of sustainable living, the film

presents the first steps to achieve this goal. This includes Issa's resignation from the corrupt police department and Ada's hope for an alternative future not rooted in the present and supported by Western capital. It even includes Souleiman and his friends as reminders of what happens when communities begin to stray from building within and are taken advantage of. The film shows that if Senegal is to survive, it is not through building futuristic-looking towers amidst a crumbling community but through deep community bonds where members can rely on one another.

For my final argument, I turn to how the film grapples with what Walsh defines as "older forces of extractivism (dispossession of land, slave labor, and gender violence) [as they] reappear in the present in different forms" (Walsh 3). In the film, we see dispossession of rights with Issa invading Souleiman's mother's home to conduct an investigation, and post-colonial slave labor becomes wage theft over several months. While gender violence, as I have argued, can be seen either through the men's spirits dominating the women of the film into enacting justice on their behalf or it could be seen through Ada's arranged marriage to a wealthy Senegalese man, Omar, her temporary imprisonment for "interfering" with Issa's investigation or her virginity exam required by Omar's family. This brings to mind Adair's ending note, where she states, "The film portrays migration as generated by state institutions, political decisions, and the force of capital" (Adair 11). Diop depicts Western imperialism, and its drive for extracting all kinds of resources from Africa has merely taken a different shape. It is now

shaped by different figures, unlike the rough hand of an empire. Instead, neoliberalism decimates the local economy, constructing giant towers with no actual use by citizens who leave their own country to seek a better life, and women become confined to the home and are illegally interrogated by the police. This is why the trans-corporeality of humans and nature, as shown through men's spirits intertwined with women's bodies and their shared history of the Atlantic, is so important in this film. It illustrates not an overly optimistic future but one where Senegal may begin to find its footing on the local and international stage.

In conclusion, *Atlantics* showcases a powerful story about how Africa's future lies not only in rejecting the present forced by Western economics but also in coming together in an intimate understanding of nature and each other. Diop emphasizes Alaimo's concept of trans-corporeality through the men's possession of the women to enact justice on their behalf and how the ocean connected them in the film. While their possession may be seen as problematic, I argue that Diop intended for the audience to see their soul and body interconnected as to how Africa will begin to move forward into the future and not rely as much on polluted foreign investment. This way forward concerns Africans, in conjunction with nature, realizing their bargaining power on the local and global stage. This power will come from empowering women in their cultures, moving past arranged marriages, deepening their collective influence, and cracking down on corrupt local political structures.

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